

January 29, 2008

Attention: House Education Committee Members

From: Dennis Smith, Executive Director Information Network for Christian Homes

Written Testimony for the House Education Committee Meeting on HB4042

We have a crisis in public education in this state with regard to the number of students who are truant, have dropped out or have been kicked out of their public school. In fact, I'm sure you are aware of a recent national study that has labeled five Michigan schools as "dropout factories." Unfortunately, the problem isn't limited to just 16 to 18 year olds. Large metro areas such as Detroit, Grand Rapids, Flint and many others have huge numbers of students between the ages of 12 to 16 roaming the streets on a daily basis. They see school as a waste of their time or one more authority figure to rebel against. There are already laws on the books dealing with truancy and delinquency that are not being enforced. Raising the compulsory attendance age to 18 will not fix the problem.

We have to look at both the parents and the public schools as the culprits and the cure for this crisis, not the legislature. Large numbers of these kids' parents either don't know or don't care that their kids are not in school. There are single parent or both parents working situations where the parents don't know and the schools aren't doing a good enough job of informing the parents that their kids are not in school. There are other situations where no matter how much the schools inform the parents, they don't care enough or have enough control of their kids to enforce their child's attendance. We have Intermediate School Districts and local school districts with attendance officers who think their job is limited to sitting behind a desk and pushing paper around. There was a time when these officers would make home visits or phone calls and speak personally with the parents and try to work with them to get their kids back on track or the parents would face legal consequences. Now contacts have been relegated to letters, emails or automated phone calls, all of which the kids know how to get rid of before the parents know about them.

Whenever new legislation is introduced to resolve a problem, one has to consider the law of unintended consequences. In other words, should this bill become law, who could be harmed when it is applied with a broad brush stroke to people for whom it was not intended? And, just as importantly, how could it be misinterpreted and misapplied by those who may have an agenda against those they wish to persecute? There are many examples where students may not be in school between the ages of 16 and 18. HB4042 does not make provision for those circumstances. Thus every kid not in school on a given day could be stopped, questioned, arrested and even taken to court over their nonattendance, even if they had a legitimate reason to not be in school.

Home school students are one group that could be considered in violation should this bill become law. But there are legitimate reasons many home school students may not be in school on any given day. As examples, they could be traveling to co-op classes or to a part time job. Some home school students complete their high school studies before age 18 and get full time jobs or begin taking college courses. For some, their school day may be done well before the public schools are done for the day. Should they not be allowed to play in their yard, go shopping, shoot some hoops at a local park or any other activity because the public school is still in session? I can easily see this bill being misapplied to these students on a frequent basis.

Home school students are not the only ones that could be affected by this bill. Some public and private school students also only attend classes for part of the day. Some attend classes on multiple campuses, such as a technical center, in addition to their base school. Some schools have in service days that are different than other schools. Some students have been expelled

temporarily or permanently from their school. In all these circumstances the students could be arrested and presumed guilty until they prove their innocence. It seems inconceivable to me that in a supposedly free society one could be arrested with the only crime being that you are a certain age and you are out in public! And who will determine whether a kid's reason for not being in school is legitimate or not?

Then there is the cost. Some kids just will not go to school. Some kids should not be allowed to go to school because they are either a danger or a constant distraction to other students who are in school to learn. Back in the day, as the kids say, we had reformed schools. Most of us never saw the inside of one or wanted to. Just the threat of being sent to one if you didn't behave was enough to keep most of us in line. I don't know if such schools even exist any more, unless that is what is meant by "alternative" schools. Unless we have separate restrictive schools for the distracters, delinquents and dropouts, we do a great disservice to the teachers and students in regular classrooms. It would cost a lot of money for additional buildings, teachers, security and other resources, all for kids who don't want what we are providing to them for free. That, in deed, is the dilemma.

We currently have a continuing budget crisis in Michigan. Yet our governor and several legislators are proposing to add to the ballooning cost of public education by not only proposing to raise the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18, but by also lowering the compulsory attendance age from six to five years old and making kindergarten mandatory and full day as it is for other grade levels. There isn't a shred of evidence that either of these proposals would positively impact the students for whom they are intended. At a time when most schools are facing declining enrollment, these proposals would require a massive infusion of additional teachers if they became law. That may be a huge benefit to the MEA, but would ill serve the tax payers of Michigan.

It is sheer folly to believe the problem of public school attendance will be solved by merely increasing the compulsory attendance age and hoping kids will comply. The unintended consequences, however, could have a far reaching negative impact on those students for whom HB4042 was not intended. It is my strong recommendation that the House Education Committee reject this bill and remove it from further consideration.

Sincerely,

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